

## Invocation

### Genevieve Jorolan-Quintero

University of the Philippines Mindanao

**About the Author.** Associate Professor Genevieve Jorolan-Quintero, PhD, is a faculty of the Humanities Department of the University of the Philippines Mindanao. Her creative works are inspired by the researches she conducted among the indigenous communities in Mindanao, which aim to preserve their oral traditions, particularly folk tales and epics. Among her recent publications is an illustrated children's book containing three folktales inspired by the B'laan indigenous community in North Cotabato and published by the National Commission for Culture and the Arts. Her scholarly and literary works have appeared in the *Journal of Literature and Art Studies* and *Kritika Kultura*.

THE DAY OF THE FEAST of San Isidro Labrador was marked with a red circle on the calendar. Instead of a wall décor, the main wall in the living room of the kumbento was dominated by the large calendar whose days were either marked with an × or a ✓ or circled in red, the white spaces filled with scribbles. Beside it was a whiteboard divided into columns and rows, the boxes containing more notes and schedules.

Being a sacristan, I had access to the kumbento and, on occasion, got invited to share meals with the parish priest, Padre Manuel. I was his assistant, his constant companion to far-off sitios, or small villages, where he celebrated mass. Checking the calendar became a ritual for me. I would mentally mark the date; even remind Padre Manuel that a fiesta was coming. Fiestas were occasions to look forward to. Aside from the abundant food served during the fiesta salu-salo, there was also the take-home pasalubong, mostly fruits, vegetables, live chicken, and some leftover

delicacies from the feast. I assumed there would be lechon, wild boar specifically. I remembered how tasty it was, so different from the lowland lechon. It was served during the barrio fiesta in Sitio Bukiron. Since I was always seated beside Padre Manuel during the meals, I got to eat the choicest dishes of the feast. My favorite, and the usual food served in fiestas, were the sweet rice cakes, caldereta, and adobo; and sometimes Padre would allow me to take a sip or two of the sweet tuba. There was always so much that Padre Manuel would give me half of the bounty, which I would take home to Nanay and Tatay.

Today, we were headed to a small sitio situated near the top of Mt. Bullawanun. As with past fiestas, I pointed the date on the calendar to Padre Manuel at least once a day.

"Padre, there are five more days before the Mt. Bullawanun fiesta."

This went on until there was only a day left. My reminders were always met by an amused smile from the padre. He would pat my head and say, "Of course, Samuel. The date I encircled on the calendar has not changed."

And the day had finally come. This would be Padre Manuel's first visit to the area. This would be the farthest place I'd get to travel as a sacristan.

"Samuel." Padre Manuel's voice was coming from his office.

#### Article Information

Received: 17 June 2015

Revised: 30 September 2015

Accepted: 20 January 2016

Published: 26 January 2016

**\*Correspondence.** Dr. Genevieve Jorolan-Quintero, Creative Writing Program, Department of Humanities, College of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of the Philippines Mindanao, Mintal, Tugbok District, Davao City 8022, Philippines. Email: gjquintero@up.edu.ph

"Yes, Padre?" I hurried to where he was.

"Make sure that the communion hosts are well-packed," he said. "We will be going up the mountain trail. I don't want any of it spilling on the ground or getting mixed with the wine."

"It is ready, Padre." I assured him.

I noticed the grim expression on Padre's face. His thick brows were knit in deep thought. The white hairs on his temple seemed to have spread. Unlike any priest his age, Padre Manuel had not shown any signs of going bald. He was packing his prayer booklet, the Bible, and his sermon notes into his backpack. Slowly, he removed his reading glasses and pressed his eyes with his thumb and forefinger. He stood in that position for a full minute and seemed to have forgotten I was there.

In his worn-out jeans, white shirt with a denim jacket thrown over it, and a pair of knee-length rubber boots, Padre Manuel seemed ready to tackle the rough road ahead and whatever else would meet us in this trip. I had traveled with him several times, had prepared all the necessary paraphernalia for the fiesta high mass. All was the same, except for Padre Manuel's mood.

He took a deep breath and then made the sign of the cross.

"We're ready to go, Samuel," he declared. Before I could say a word, he was out of the door, and I had to run to catch up.

Padre Manuel started the large motorbike and waited until I was settled behind him. And then we were off. He was quiet, and I wasn't sure what to say, so I kept to myself, looking ahead as we turned from the highway to a rocky trail leading to the mountain sitio.

The road became narrower as the climb became steeper. I was relieved Padre Manuel was a skilled motorbike rider. Soon the first houses of the sitio appeared. A man on horseback met us.

"Padre Manuel, welcome to Sitio Bulawan." He got off his horse and walked towards the priest. He reached for the priest's hand and pressed it to his forehead.

"Kumusta, Fernando. God bless you." Padre Manuel smiled at Fernando, touching the man's head. "This is Samuel, my sacristan."

Manong Fernando nodded at me. He was the only kaabag in the sitio. As lay minister,

it was his task to make sure that the Catholic population was taken care of in the absence of the priest. Lay ministers would organize and lead the kasaulogan or prayer meetings, which were equivalent but are not substitutes to the holy mass.

We followed him to the top of a low hill where the small chapel stood. The silence of the place didn't seem to signal a fiesta. From inside the chapel emerged two women with broomsticks and rugs. They immediately approached Padre Manuel and pressed his hand to their foreheads.

"God bless you," said Padre Manuel.

"This is Amina, my wife, Padre." Fernando introduced the women. "And this is my daughter, Lucia. They are cleaning the chapel to get it ready for the mass today."

"But where are the others?" Padre Manuel got off the motorbike. I followed, looking quizzically at Lucia whose eyes never left the ground.

"Come, Padre. Come, Samuel." Fernando led us to a small kiosk beside the chapel. "We have prepared some food for you."

On a makeshift table inside the kiosk were placed a plate of boiled bananas, another plate of boiled kamote, and a kettle of coffee. There was also a plate of what looked like shrimps, and I wondered how they got shrimps up here.

"These are freshwater shrimps," Manang Amina explained as though she read my thoughts. "We got this from the waterfall basin. Here, taste it."

I nodded and gingerly picked one. It did taste like shrimp, I thought. I helped myself with a piece each of a banana and a sweet potato and a mug of warm coffee. I thought of all the other delicacies that would be served later during the fiesta salu-salo. There would definitely be lechon. The roast pig was never absent in fiestas. My stomach seemed to constrict at the thought.

Padre Manuel, who accepted a mug of coffee from Manang Amina, was in deep conversation with Fernando.

"The other members of the tribe have been critical of the Catholic church, Padre," Manong Fernando began. "I tried hard to make them attend the prayer meetings and to enlist for baptism. A few showed interest, but the rest remained skeptical."

"You are having a difficult time, Fernando," said Padre Manuel. It was not a question. "But I sense your dedication to the church."

"Yes, Padre. I have accepted Jesus Christ in my life, and my family has, too," Fernando continued. "I found meaning in life, in what I do, because of the teachings of the church. And I would like my people to see and to experience what I did after becoming a Christian."

Fernando stood and paced back and forth. He stopped and, without looking at Padre Manuel, said in a low voice, "Do you think I have betrayed my people by converting into the religion of the lowlanders, Padre? By becoming a Catholic?"

I stopped eating and slowly placed my mug of coffee on the table. Manang Amina and Lucia were looking at Padre Manuel.

"I used to believe in the spirits of nature, Padre," Fernando went on. "We invoke them when there is drought. We invoke them when there is sickness in our homes. We invoke them when there is trouble among us . . ."

Padre Manuel remained quiet. He watched Fernando with sympathy in his eyes, listening to his every word.

"But when I read the Bible and talk to the priests, especially to you, Padre . . . it is different. I came to see . . .," declared Fernando, his face alight. "I came to experience Jesus Christ. When I pray to him, when I invoke him, I feel my heart lighten. This is what I want my people to understand, Padre. But they are doubtful."

Fernando paused and continued. "It is the priestess, Manay Gilay, who is keeping my people from embracing the teachings of the church. It is she who wants us to hold on to the beliefs of our ancestors and shun the religion that you teach."

"But I saw her in our prayer meetings, Nanding," Manang Amina said.

"I saw her, too, Mina, but she never stepped inside the chapel," Fernando replied.

I glanced at the chapel and noticed how desolate it looked. There wasn't a single colorful streamer hanging from branches of trees around the chapel or from the beams and ceiling inside. It was here where the prayer meetings were held. Two rows of low benches stood before a platform where a rectangular table served as the altar. Normally, the altar would be decorated with at

least a vase filled with flowers. But this altar was bare. On the wall hung a small crucifix. There wasn't the slightest hint of a festive spirit in the place. And I wondered whether the schedule was correct, or if we had arrived a day early. But I couldn't be mistaken. I checked the calendar every day. Today was indeed the fiesta of Sitio Bulawan.

I looked at the boiled bananas and the sweet potatoes. The shrimps on the plate seemed to stare back at me. And then it dawned on me that perhaps these could be the only fiesta *salu-salo* we would partake of. There won't be any *pabaon* to take home at all. There didn't seem enough for even the five of us. I couldn't take my mind off the food I imagined would be served and the actual food before me. I looked around hoping people would be coming, bringing pots and plates containing the delicacies I hoped for. But no one came.

"You believe in the Magbabaya, don't you, Fernando?" Padre Manuel's voice interfered with my thoughts. "You believe in the Great Spirit in the Sky, right?"

Fernando stared at the priest, confused. "Yes, Padre Manuel."

"Then you believe in one and the same Great Spirit who is called by different names but is only one."

"But, Padre Manuel . . ." Fernando began.

"Come, Fernando." Padre Manuel motioned Fernando to sit. "There is no reason for you to be confused. God, the Great Spirit, the Magbabaya . . . however we call the Supreme Being does not matter. All that matters is that we find peace in our hearts, because we acknowledge Him and we know that He acknowledges us."

Fernando stared long at the ground. When he raised his eyes, there were tears in them. He took Padre Manuel's hand and pressed it to his forehead.

"Come," Padre Manuel said. "We have a mass to celebrate."

"Yes, Padre." Fernando wiped away his tears with his sleeves and stood up. He headed towards a tree where a piece of metal tube was hung. He then took a metal stick and started hitting the tube with it, creating a bell-like sound that echoed throughout the sitio. This was their way of summoning the villagers.

I hurriedly drank my coffee and thanked Manang Amina and Lucia for the food. Lucia still refused to look at me. I then got the backpacks and carried them inside the chapel where Padre Manuel was putting on his alb and stole. I carefully placed the tabernacle and the crucifix on the altar and the two chalices that contained the blessed communion hosts and the wine.

Outside, Fernando was still beating the metal tube.

After a few minutes, Padre Manuel came out of the chapel.

Fernando looked at the priest and shook his head. "Nobody is coming, Padre."

"Let us wait a while longer, Fernando," Padre Manuel said. Then he smiled. "We have the whole day."

I sat on one of the benches inside the chapel. Manang Amina and Lucia came and continued wiping the benches with their rugs although there was no more dust on them.

"Let me help you, manang," I offered.

"Oh, you don't have to, Samuel." Manang Amina gestured for me to go out. "You are wearing your white sotana already. Go outside while Lucia and I finish cleaning the benches."

"I'll stay but won't get in the way," I replied.

"So, how old are you, Samuel?" Manang Amina asked.

"I am almost fifteen, manang."

"You and Lucia are of the same age then. How long have you been an altar boy?"

"My father is actually a lay minister in the parish church in the Centro, like Manong Fernando. It was he who encouraged me to be a sacristan. I've been assisting the priests since I was twelve years old," I explained.

"And perhaps you would become a priest too..." Lucia spoke.

I was surprised to hear Lucia's voice. It sounded soft and pleasant.

"A priest?" I stammered. "But I . . . well, I never really thought of that . . ."

"You would make a fine priest, Samuel," Manang Amina quipped.

I could only smile sheepishly. "I guess I better go to Padre Manuel."

I hurriedly left the two women in their tasks. A priest? Me? I couldn't shake off the

thought. I looked at Padre Manuel, pacing near the tree, his hands behind him. He was in deep thought. Could I be like Padre Manuel? I had been told that priesthood is a calling, a vocation. God would choose his ministers. He would call them. Would God call me? Would I have answers to difficult questions about religion like Padre Manuel? He was now standing still under the tree. He looked invulnerable in his priestly vestments, a true champion of the church, I mused. Somehow I couldn't imagine myself becoming like him. I was happy with performing the duties of a sacristan, running errands for the padre, standing with him on the altar as he celebrated mass. Everyone expected a sacristan to evolve into a priest later in life. If then the call would come to me, I guess I would have to heed it. But right now, I was becoming more concerned about the villagers not hearing the call to come and hear the fiesta mass.

"Padre Manuel, I'm so sorry," I heard Fernando speak. "I tried my best. I told them a priest's visit is very important. But nobody seemed to have heard me. Nobody wants to come today. I am so sorry, Padre. You came a long way for nothing."

Fernando seemed to echo my thoughts. He moved away from the tree and retreated to the kiosk. I walked towards the Padre.

"Padre Manuel?" I ventured. "Should we be leaving soon?"

I heard Padre Manuel take a deep breath before he turned to me. "Remember, Samuel, God said that where there are two or three gathered in His name, He is with them. I shall celebrate mass even with only Fernando, Amina, Lucia, and you. That is what we came here for today."

Celebrating mass with only three attendees? I thought. This had never happened before. Not fully understanding the wisdom behind this, I followed Padre Manuel who went to the kiosk to coax Fernando to come inside the chapel.

On the platform, I stood beside Padre Manuel who was beginning the opening prayer.

"My dear brothers and sisters in Christ . . ." His voice trailed, his attention drawn outside. I followed his gaze. Fernando, Amina, and Lucia who were on one bench followed suit.

Coming uphill was a group of women wearing their traditional dresses, followed by men and children. A frail old woman was leading the group. Padre Manuel seemed to hesitate as he stood a moment longer on the platform. Then he saw the figure leading the group. He stepped down from the platform and headed outside.

The group stopped before the door of the chapel where Padre Manuel was ready to meet them.

Fernando was beside Padre Manuel. In a trembling voice, he said, "Padre Manuel, that is Manay Gilay."

Hurriedly, Padre Manuel approached the frail old woman and bowed before her.

"Manay Gilay," he said. "It is wonderful to have you all here. Come and share the celebration with us."

There was an evident glow in his eyes as he ushered the newcomers into the chapel. With his right hand pressed on his chest, he bowed again.

I saw Manay Gilay take a step back. Padre Manuel stayed on his spot, his hands stretched in a gesture of welcome. Manay Gilay looked at the priest. Like the other women who were with her, she was wearing the tribe's traditional dress and accessories, colorful and festive. She seemed to be surrounded by an aura of authority. Her eyes were small but sharp and seemed to see through anything. I wouldn't want to be the subject of their scrutiny. These eyes were now studying Padre Manuel, from his greying hair, his priestly garb, and the manner in which he bowed before her.

On the platform, I felt cold sweat running down my neck. I was apprehensive, worried that the group might not come inside the chapel. What could happen then? Would Padre Manuel continue celebrating the mass while Manay Gilay's group stood outside? Would Manay Gilay stop the mass?

I noticed Manay Gilay move her scrutiny from Padre Manuel to the altar. I felt her eyes on me. I cringed. I was relieved that her eyes shifted from me to the crucifix on the altar. She stared at it longer. And then, without saying anything, she walked past Padre Manuel towards a bench. The others followed. Padre Manuel waited until the benches were filled before walking back to the

altar. The benches were too few to accommodate everyone. Most of them remained outside, quietly paying attention to the words of Padre Manuel.

Padre Manuel's voice echoed inside the small chapel and could be heard clearly by those outside. He spoke about love and peace, and about the One God, whom he referred to as the Magbabaya, and every man and woman being the children of the Magbabaya. Manay Gilay never took her eyes off the priest; she appeared to be intently listening to every word he was saying.

When it was time for the Holy Communion, Padre Manuel stood in front of the altar holding the chalice containing the communion hosts. I was on his side holding the chalice that contained the wine.

No one stood and queued for the communion. Padre Manuel waited. Even Fernando hesitated on his bench. My hand shook. What if nobody would partake of the Holy Communion? The mass would be ruined.

"Padre?" I turned to Padre Manuel nervously.

Before he could say anything, someone stood up. It was Manay Gilay. I saw her walk slowly towards Padre Manuel. As she stood before the priest, I had the sudden uncomfortable thought that she might not accept the host. What would she do? I looked from her to Padre Manuel.

"The body of Christ," he said.

She didn't move nor respond but stared at the host. I fidgeted. Padre Manuel's hand holding the host was steady. And then, Manay Gilay opened her mouth. Padre Manuel gently placed the host on her tongue.

I thought she stood longer in the queue than normally expected of those receiving communion. With the host in her mouth, she seemed to be taking her time studying its texture, its taste. I saw a hint of a frown on her brows. And then she looked at Padre Manuel. All this while, he stood before the balyan without a hint of impatience on his face, only the willingness to wait as long as it took.

I heard the whispered "Amen" distinctly.

I exhaled. I didn't notice I was holding my breath until after I heard Manay Gilay's voice. After saying "amen," she nodded at Padre

Manuel and slowly turned and went back to the bench.

There was a slight commotion as the rest of the congregation queued to receive communion. Fernando was the last in the queue. And when he accepted the host, his “amen” could be heard by everyone.

Every adult man and woman in the congregation received communion that day. For a moment, I was even worried that there wouldn’t be enough host for everyone.

After the closing prayer and the community blessing was given, Manay Gilay came to Padre Manuel.

And in an unexpected gesture, she reached out and held his hands, and in a gentle voice, she said, “We celebrated your ritual with you. Now, it is time for you to celebrate with us.”

Padre Manuel let the priestess lead her outside the chapel. The villagers had already gathered in a circle. Some of the men had brought out gimbals and kudlongs. Upon seeing Manay Gilay, they started beating the drums and playing the two-stringed guitars.

Manay Gilay led Padre Manuel into the middle of the circle. She raised her arms and closed her eyes. She started chanting, invoking the spirits. Her voice seemed to be carried to the sky. And in a trance, her feet moved to the rhythm of the drums. She continued chanting and singing. Her frail body moved in regular

rhythm. I couldn’t imagine someone as old as she moving so quickly and gracefully. She opened her eyes and held Padre Manuel’s hand again.

“Come, Padre,” she said. “Join me in the invocation.”

Padre Manuel smiled. He listened to the drums and allowed his feet to move in synchrony with the sounds. Soon Manay Gilay and Padre Manuel were stomping their feet in harmony. The villagers clapped their hands in glee. The men shouted in appreciation and awe. The women joined the priest and the balyan. Fernando and Amina were also led to the center. Fernando was cautious at first, but Amina showed him the familiar steps. He closed his eyes and was soon swaying and dancing with his wife, his arms extended gracefully, doing the traditional dance. Lucia danced with the other young women. Her movements were graceful and lithe. I could swear she glanced at me, then continued to dance with the rest. A warm feeling spread through me.

I stood under the tree where Padre Manuel was standing earlier. From there, I watched the festive spirit taking over everyone. Even at a distance, I felt it reaching out to me. My feet began stomping, following the rhythm of the gimbal. Soon, I, too, started dancing. The music of the gimbal and kudlong, the sound of laughter and the clapping of hands echoed on the hill, to the forest and the mountains beyond.

#### SUGGESTED CITATION

JOROLAN-QUINTERO, GENEVIEVE. 2016. “Invocation” (Fiction). *Banwa* 11A: Lit-008. [Date of access] <http://ojs.upmin.edu.ph/index.php/banwa-a/article/view/209>